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TAGS: MARR PREL TU

SUBJECT: NEW USAFE AND TURKISH AF COMMANDERS GET OFF TO A
POSITIVE START

Classified By: Ambassador Ross Wilson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: On his initial visit to Ankara as USAFE commander, General Thomas Hobbins and Turkish Air Force (TUAF) Commander General Faruk Comert focused on how to improve the relationship through practical cooperation like sharing US lessons learned flying air patrols over Lithuania before Turks assume that responsibility next year, or resuming the stationing of a liaison officer with the USAF Training Command. Comert raised recent Turkish air defense alerts triggered by unexpected flights south of the Turkey-Iraq border, and TUAF's interest in acquiring surplus F-16s. He also noted an under-appreciation for Turkey's opening of its airspace during the Iraq War. Comert reported that Ankara turned down Israel's request to increase air training in Turkey, and he explained some of the limitations on TUAF training at Konya AB and elsewhere. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Turkish Air Force Commander Faruk Comert warmly welcomed US Air Forces Europe (USAFFE) Commander General Thomas Hobbins and the Ambassador to his office December 26. Comert averred that no major problems existed between TUAF and USAFE; although the overall bilateral relationship had gone through some difficult times in the past, including the March 1, 2003 parliamentary vote that prevented US ground forces from transiting Turkey to Iraq. Nonetheless, through the bad times the armed forces endeavored to maintain positive relations, such as Turkey's opening its airspace for the US to prosecute the Iraq War, the value of which was generally missed by the media. US-Turkish friendship is a necessity for regional stability, he declared. Gen Hobbins agreed, saying he intended to work for good relations and mentioning ground-space connectivity as a possible area for cooperation.

¶3. (C) Airspace Infringements: Comert said flights in Iraq near the border had recently caused TUAF to go on alert or even scramble interceptors. He recalled that on occasion, USAF aircraft had "violated" Turkish airspace or over-flown without notification. Comert said that these incidents had caused him to initiate combat air patrols (CAPs) near the border. (Note: We subsequently learned that the CAPs were temporary, in response to specific flights detected approaching Turkey. End note.) He said TUAF needed better information on flight operations near Turkey in Iraq and proposed a meeting of the MNF-I air chief and his commander of the border region (2nd Air Force). ODC-Turkey Chief Maj

Gen Peter Sutton noted that TGS had raised similar concerns recently that ODC was pursuing with MNF-I. AAIRA noted that Turkish liaison officers in Iraq and Tampa have access to daily air tasking orders (ATO), but allowed that they might not understand it as most are Land Forces officers.

Acquiring a "CENTRIX" intelligence system terminal in Ankara or at the Second Air Force headquarters in Diyarbakir might resolve the problem with Turkish detection of flights near the border. (Note: On December 2 Turkish aircraft intercepted a USAF C-17 that had difficulty communicating with Turkish air traffic controllers. TGS and MFA recently raised with us both the C-17 "airspace violation" and flights in Iraq near the Turkish border that have caused its air defenses to go on alert -- septel. End note.)

¶4. (SBU) Lithuanian CAP: Comert said that Turkey was scheduled to take on the mission of air policing over Lithuania from April to July 2006. He worried about the lack of tankers and a fuel transfer system at the base NATO forces use for this mission. Gen Hobbins noted that the US was flying that mission currently but would shortly hand it off to the Poles. He offered to share the US lessons learned; Comert accepted, suggesting that the Turkish site survey team could stop in Spangdahlem after surveying the base in Lithuania.

¶5. (SBU) Surplus F-16s: Comert lamented TUAF's insufficient resources -- money and equipment. He noted that TUAF is planning on introducing JSF into its inventory in 2014, but that F-16 attrition and aging F-4s required TUAF to acquire aircraft in the interim to meet its requirements. To that end, Turkey had requested "to buy, lease or receive as a grant" surplus F-16s from the US. He understood, however, that the US had none for the time being. Hobbins noted that upgrading F-16s to bring them to Turkish standards could be expensive.

¶6. (C) Working together: Comert agreed that upgrades could be expensive, citing the \$1.1 billion Peace Onyx III program to upgrade Turkey's F-16s. Gen Hobbins said the program would improve Turkish capability. Comert said his goal for TUAF was to acquire the same capabilities and links as the USAF so the two air forces could fight effectively together. This would also help maintain inter-operability with Europe, he said. Gen Hobbins expressed his willingness to partner with Turkey. To that end, Comert said he wanted the two air forces to train together. He regretted that TUAF missed the deadline to participate in Red Flag this year, but hoped to be there in 2007. He also said that he wanted to reestablish the Turkish exchange officer position at USAF's Air Education and Training Command (AETC), which had been cut in 2004 due to a lack of funding.

¶7. (C) Training in Turkey: Comert stated that TUAF operations out of Konya AB (home to exercise Anatolian Eagle) routinely cause noise complaints from local citizens. He also explained that TUAF is prohibited from using chaff and flares over land due to environmental concerns. Gen Hobbins responded that encroachment of bases and managing the resulting complaints were issues for the USAF as well. He expressed surprise at the restrictions on chaff and flares in Turkey, pointing out that, in the U.S., military aircraft are authorized to drop chaff and flares in military ranges/airspace above certain altitudes which allow their effects to dissipate. (Note: We understand TUAF is seeking authority to use chaff and flares over Konya Range. End note.)

¶8. (C) 'No' to Israel: Comert reported that Israeli Defense Forces had recently requested increased air training opportunities in Turkey. During the December 22-23 visit of Israeli Chief of Staff Dan Halutz, Comert made clear to Halutz that this was out of the question because it would require "parliamentary approval."

WILSON